in Kansas City for a segment about reaction to the fall of Baghdad. A second report told of ''another success'' in the Bush administration's ''drive to strengthen aviation security''; the reporter called it ''one of the most remarkable campaigns in aviation history.'' A third segment, broadcast in January, described the administration's determination to open markets for American farmers.

To a viewer, each report looked like any other 90-second segment on the local news. In fact, the federal government produced all three. The report from Kansas City was made by the State Department. The ''reporter'' covering airport safety was actually a public relations professional working under a false name for the Transportation Security Administration. The farming segment was done by the Agriculture Department's office of communications.

Under the Bush administration, the federal government has aggressively used a well-established tool of public relations: the prepackaged, ready-to-serve news report that major corporations have long distributed to TV stations to pitch everything from headache remedies to auto insurance. In all, at least 20 federal agencies, including the Defense Department and the Census Bureau, have made and distributed hundreds of television news segments in the past four years, records and interviews show. Many were subsequently broadcast on local stations across the country without any acknowledgement of the government's role in their production.

This winter, Washington has been roiled by revelations that a handful of columnists wrote in support of administration policies without disclosing they had accepted payments from the government. But the administration's efforts to generate positive news coverage have been considerably more pervasive than previously known. At the same time, records and interviews suggest widespread complicity or negligence by television stations, given industry ethics standards that discourage the broadcast of prepackaged news segments from any outside group without revealing the source.

Federal agencies are forthright with broadcasters about the origin of the news segments they distribute. The reports themselves, though, are designed to fit seamlessly into the typical local news broadcast. In most cases, the ''reporters'' are careful not to state in the segment that they work for the government. Their reports generally avoid overt ideological appeals. Instead, the government's news-making apparatus has produced a quiet drumbeat of broadcasts describing a vigilant and compassionate administration.

Some reports were produced to support the administration's most cherished policy objectives, like regime change in Iraq or Medicare reform. Others focused on less prominent matters, like the administration's efforts to offer free after-school tutoring, its campaign to curb childhood obesity, its initiatives to preserve forests and wetlands, its plans to fight computer viruses, even its attempts to fight holiday drunken driving. They often feature ''interviews'' with senior administration officials in which questions are scripted and answers rehearsed. Critics, though, are excluded, as are any hints of mismanagement, waste or controversy.

Some of the segments were broadcast in some of nation's largest television markets, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas and Atlanta.

An examination of government-produced news reports offers a look inside a world where the traditional lines between public relations and journalism have become tangled, where local anchors introduce prepackaged segments with ''suggested'' leadins written by public relations experts. It is a world where government-produced reports disappear into a maze of satellite transmissions, Web portals, syndicated news programs and network feeds, only to emerge cleansed on the other side as ''independent'' journalism.

It is also a world where all participants benefit.

Local affiliates are spared the expense of digging up original material. Public relations firms secure government contracts worth millions of dollars. The major networks, which help distribute the releases, collect fees from the government agencies that produce segments and the affiliates that show them. The administration, meanwhile, gets out an unfiltered message, delivered in the guise of traditional reporting.

The practice, which also occurred in the Clinton administration, is continuing despite President Bush's recent call for a clearer demarcation between journalism and government publicity efforts. ''There needs to be a nice independent relationship between the White House and the press,'' Mr. Bush told reporters in January, explaining why his administration would no longer pay pundits to support his policies.

In interviews, though, press officers for several federal agencies said the president's prohibition did not apply to government-made television news segments, also known as video news releases. They described the segments as factual, politically neutral and useful to viewers. They insisted that there was no similarity to the case of Armstrong Williams, a conservative columnist who promoted the administration's chief education initiative, the No Child Left Behind Act, without disclosing $240,000 in payments from the Education Department.

What is more, these officials argued, it is the responsibility of television news directors to inform viewers that a segment about the government was in fact written by the government. ''Talk to the television stations that ran it without attribution,'' said William A. Pierce, spokesman for the Department of Health and Human Services. ''This is not our problem. We can't be held responsible for their actions.''

Yet in three separate opinions in the past year, the Government Accountability Office, an investigative arm of Congress that studies the federal government and its expenditures, has held that government made news segments may constitute improper ''covert propaganda'' even if their origin is made clear to the television stations. The point, the office said, is whether viewers know the origin. Last month, in its most recent finding, the G.A.O. said federal agencies may not produce prepackaged news reports ''that conceal or do not clearly identify for the television viewing audience that the agency was the source of those materials.''

It is not certain, though, whether the office's pronouncements will have much practical effect. Although a few federal agencies have stopped making television news segments, others continue. And on Friday, the Justice Department and the Office of Management and Budget circulated a memorandum instructing all executive branch agencies to ignore the G.A.O. findings. The memorandum said the G.A.O. failed to distinguish between covert propaganda and ''purely informational'' news segments made by the government. Such informational segments are legal, the memorandum said, whether or not an agency's role in producing them is disclosed to viewers.

Even if agencies do disclose their role, those efforts can easily be undone in a broadcaster's editing room. Some news organizations, for example, simply identify the government's ''reporter'' as one of their own and then edit out any phrase suggesting the segment was not of their making.

So in a recent segment produced by the Agriculture Department, the agency's narrator ended the report by saying ''In Princess Anne, Maryland, I'm Pat O'Leary reporting for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.'' Yet AgDay, a syndicated farm news program that is shown on some 160 stations, simply introduced the segment as being by ''AgDay's Pat O'Leary.'' The final sentence was then trimmed to ''In Princess Anne, Maryland, I'm Pat O'Leary reporting.''

Brian Conrady, executive producer of AgDay, defended the changes. ''We can clip 'Department of Agriculture' at our choosing,'' he said. ''The material we get from the U.S.D.A., if we choose to air it and how we choose to air it is our choice.''

SPREADING THE WORD: GOVERNMENT EFFORTS AND ONE WOMAN'S ROLE

Karen Ryan cringes at the phrase ''covert propaganda.'' These are words for dictators and spies, and yet they have attached themselves to her like a pair of handcuffs.

Not long ago, Ms. Ryan was a much sought-after ''reporter'' for news segments produced by the federal government. A journalist at ABC and PBS who became a public relations consultant, Ms. Ryan worked on about a dozen reports for seven federal agencies in 2003 and early 2004. Her segments for the Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of National Drug Control Policy were a subject of the accountability office's recent inquiries.

The G.A.O. concluded that the two agencies ''designed and executed'' their segments ''to be indistinguishable from news stories produced by private sector television news organizations.'' A significant part of that execution, the office found, was Ms. Ryan's expert narration, including her typical signoff—''In Washington, I'm Karen Ryan reporting''—delivered in a tone and cadence familiar to television reporters everywhere.

Last March, when The New York Times first described her role in a segment about new prescription drug benefits for Medicare patients, reaction was harsh. In Cleveland, The Plain Dealer ran an editorial under the headline ''Karen Ryan, You're a Phony,'' and she was the object of late-night jokes by Jon Stewart and received hate mail.

''I'm like the Marlboro man,'' she said in a recent interview.

In fact, Ms. Ryan was a bit player who made less than $5,000 for her work on government reports. She was also playing an accepted role in a lucrative art form, the video news release. ''I just don't feel I did anything wrong,'' she said. ''I just did what everyone else in the industry was doing.''

It is a sizable industry. One of its largest players, Medialink Worldwide Inc., has about 200 employees, with offices in New York and London. It produces and distributes about 1,000 video news releases a year, most commissioned by major corporations. The Public Relations Society of America even gives an award, the Bronze Anvil, for the year's best video news release.

Several major television networks play crucial intermediary roles in the business. Fox, for example, has an arrangement with Medialink to distribute video news releases to 130 affiliates through its video feed service, Fox News Edge. CNN distributes releases to 750 stations in the United States and Canada through a similar feed service, CNN Newsource. Associated Press Television News does the same thing worldwide with its Global Video Wire.

''We look at them and determine whether we want them to be on the feed,'' David M. Winstrom, director of Fox News Edge, said of video news releases. ''If got one that said tobacco cures cancer or something like that, I would kill it.''